



Produced by Interoperability Montana

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Interoperability Montana and the Fire Community:

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

An Interoperability Montana White Paper

Since 2005, Interoperability Montana has undertaken the task of building an interoperable communications system for Montana's public safety and emergency services. Interoperable communications have been identified by Governor Schweitzer and Montana's Statewide Interoperability Executive Council. The essential elements of this system are:

- Adoption of a standard protocol for radios, namely the "Project 25" radio technology, as identified by the American Public-Safety Communications Officers (APCO) organization.
- Continued use and integration of conventional mutual aid frequencies, along with new "interoperable channels" using VHF frequencies.
- A combination of "trunking" (automated switching of calls along several available frequencies) and conventional radio technologies.
- Microwave links between strategically placed towers, allowing communications across county lines or other artificial boundaries.

A number of fire departments already are using trunked radios in Lewis & Clark and Hill Counties, areas located within "Concept Demonstration Projects" for interoperable communications systems. However, other members of Montana's fire service community have been vocal in their concerns over a trunked system. Some have stated their concerns in person to IM officials or have shared those concerns in written form among their peers and with state officials. Among their arguments:

- Current mutual aid practices serve the state well and require no enhancement.
- Fire services have proven their ability to respond to major incidents in their communities.
- The IM system will prove too costly, especially for small volunteer departments that have very little financial resources in the first place.
- The P25 radio technology is needlessly advanced for fire operations in Montana and requires radios that are too complicated and expensive.
- Major fire departments, especially the Phoenix Fire Department, have determined that trunked radio systems are unsafe for fire fighters in "hazard zone" situations.

In this white paper, IM will provide information about the Montana interoperable system and how Montana's fire service community can use it effectively. The report is presented in five parts:

- **I:** An overview of the IM system that addresses specific fire fighter concerns.
- **II:** A Q&A with two Montana rural volunteer fire chiefs who have used trunked radio technology successfully in Lewis & Clark County.
- **III:** A conversation with leaders of the Phoenix Fire Department, which recently has adopted trunked radio technology for all non-hazard calls.
- **IV:** Collected comments from the fire community from IM's recent series of outreach meetings conducted across the state.
- **V:** Information on trunking taken from the Phoenix Fire Department's "800MHz" website.